Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Cricket in Union Station: Kate Maruyama on #90X90 & Summer of 2014

Kate Maruyama · Wednesday, April 5th, 2017

I had heard whisperings of 90X90 and the sheer bravado of the challenge is what drew me to it. Who were these people who were going to plan so many events in so few days and ensure that it was free? I knew this was something not to be missed.

But, being an undependable Angeleno who was wrapped up in school crap for my kids, it took me about a month to get there.

I didn't go until they were at Union Station. I had two friends reading one night and I always show up for friends. The moment I arrived, I regretted I hadn't attended earlier. A few folks turned up for the reading, a respectable amount, like fifteen, in the small bar TRAXX that opened out into the station. But as the readings began, the number grew. The sheer power of voices projecting words over a small speaker drew some more people from outside. By the time the reading came to a close, the seating outside the bar was filled and a few folks had wandered up to the gate surrounding the sitting space.

I started going to more events and I had also signed up to run one event, appear in a few others. I can't remember which event completely blew me away—maybe it was Natashia Deón's Dirty Laundry Lit, in which I was reading. But the place was packed. The bar, the seating space outside the bar, and a larger concentric circle. By my guess, close to 200 people. After my reading (I can't really breathe or think before I read) I was sitting, watching the crowd, when I saw people wander up to the edge of the enormous group with their luggage, transfixed by the words of a writer. They stopped, luggage trailing behind them. I thought they'd move on when a break came, but they stood there the entire time, listening. And I thought of that scene in *A Cricket in Times Square* where Chester Cricket plays a song so sweet the entire subway stops to listen. I don't think these folks would have gone out of their way to hear words or a reading, but here they were, stopped after a trip, soaking it up. And I thought about accessibility for literature and voices and readings and the power of words and I thought Writ Large had done something magical here. And I knew that I was seeing something larger and more powerful going on, so I started paying closer attention.

[alert type=alert-white]Please consider making a tax-deductible donation now so we can keep publishing strong creative voices.[/alert]

The PUBLISH! events! The idea of owning the word *publish* again and offering anyone from this vast and varied city the canvas on which to project their thoughts and voices. I'm a writing teacher and work with my students to help them articulate their thoughts, get their voices onto paper, which is a huge privilege. I'm always excited when a student realizes that their words totally matter, even if it doesn't resemble what they read in high school. That they might matter more. The educational system tells kids repeatedly that they are doing it wrong; this silences more folks than you'd know for longer than you'd imagine.

PUBLISH!

When they reach this moment of realization, when they are empowered, that's when the good work starts flowing. But Writ Large was creating a space to get their words OUT there. And HEARD. That was extremely powerful. I wonder how many new writers were born that summer. I'm guessing more than a few.

PUBLISH!

At a Writ Large event, Sesshu Foster said that instead of shaking their fist at the door they can't get through, Writ Large was in the business of building new doors. 90X90 built a whole lotta doors.

Each event I showed up to was completely different, a different section from the Venn diagram of bubbles of Los Angeles writers who write, read, and socialize in pockets around the city. What was nice to see is people from different bubbles entirely coming together and getting to know each other. I think Writ Large opened up the city to itself that summer, connected it. And Los Angeles has a habit of growing its mini communities organically. You cannot wrangle them into one entity and it would be foolish to try. But you can, by raising their interest in a cause, get them working hard together. By its sheer openness and lack of strong-arming (I was surprised the openness I was given to create a night of horror readings; Chiwan gave me the basic timeline and answered my questions, but the rest was up to me), Writ Large managed to coax writers out of their mini comfort zones, bring them into the larger city and, I hope, as they did for me, opened up the city for them in a different way.

Maybe they made folks understand that everyone's voice is equally valuable in this city, which is what makes it unique. There is no hierarchy, there is simply a huge population of varying points of view that bump up against each other, coexist. A place where different ideas can exist at the same time. In a way, 90X90 burned down any ideas of boundaries and limitations on literature, stepped outside the faulty and limiting gatekeepers' and big publishing's construct of what is literature, what is not, what should be read, what should not. It made literature and language a living, breathing, vibrant thing again. Something that it should have been all along. And something that is way more interesting and exciting than a few books a few people decide the world can read.



And there is a part of me that woke up that summer that in living in Los Angeles I might be in exactly the best place in the world to be for a writer. Because the connection of ideas and different work, of communities and voices, the sheer friction created from getting that many folks

together…that creates an energy you can't capture in a controlled environment. I'm betting there are collaborations that began over 90X90, I know of two for sure.

And in this time when we need each other so much more and so many communities need to come together to push back and protect those made most vulnerable by this nightmare administration, I can't think of a better act of social justice than 90×90. Perhaps that *A Cricket in Times Square* effect can make someone who was asleep wake up, make voices heard that wouldn't be, otherwise. And people really need to hear other voices now. Maybe 90×90 can be a catalyst for real change. If nothing else, get folks together from all different corners of the city bumping up against each other again. Because out of that energy, who knows what can happen?

This entry was posted on Wednesday, April 5th, 2017 at 8:00 pm and is filed under Fiction, Discourse
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.